

The *Starting Fresh in Low-Performing Schools* series provides district leaders with a blueprint for making deep and lasting change – the kind that is likely to lead to improvements in our most struggling schools. Presented in five parts, the *Starting Fresh* series honestly addresses the challenges of restructuring low-performing schools. Through these books, districts learn both **why** and **how** to use the start fresh strategy successfully.

- 1 A New Option for School District Leaders under NCLB
- 2 Engaging Parents and the Community
- 3 Selecting the Right Providers
- 4 Establishing the Right Relationship Terms
- 5 Empowering Teachers



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## Selecting the Right Providers



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## Starting Fresh in Low-Performing Schools

The National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) is a professional resource for authorizers and other education officials interested in using choice, autonomy and accountability to improve student performance.

**NACSA's mission is to achieve the establishment and operation of quality charter schools through responsible oversight in the public interest.** We believe that quality authorizing plays a critical role in creating and sustaining quality charter schools. A quality charter school is characterized by high student achievement, financial stewardship, and responsible governance and management. Charter schools can improve public education by creating greater educational opportunities for students and educators and greater educational accountability for public schools.

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Districts and states across the country have a growing sense of urgency about turning around chronically low-performing schools. Spurred by state accountability systems and the federal No Child Left Behind mandate to “restructure” such schools, education leaders are seeking out new ways to create success for children attending schools where too many have failed for far too long.

**In contrast** to more conventional “change” strategies, starting fresh gives the provider a great deal more control over school operations – such as staffing, management policies, instruction, curriculum, schedules, discipline and parent relations.

One new approach that districts and states are now beginning to employ is “starting fresh.” When they use starting fresh (See *Starting Fresh in Low-Performing Schools: a New Option for District Leaders under NCLB*), district leaders allow a “new school” to start within the walls of a pre-existing school building. They empower an education provider (See: *Who are Start Fresh “Providers?”*) to start and run a school under a clearly defined, performance-based contract. In contrast to more conventional “change” strategies, starting fresh gives the provider a great deal more control over school operations – such as staffing, management policies, instruction, curriculum, schedules, discipline and parent relations. This control allows the start fresh school to target every policy and practice to the learning needs of that school’s students, even when their needs differ profoundly from other students in local district schools. Extensive research from a variety of organizational fields suggests that this kind of fresh start is often the best way to achieve the dramatic change the most challenged schools need.



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## How Can “Restructuring” Under No Child Left Behind Enable a School to “Start Fresh?”

Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, when schools fail to make Adequate Yearly Progress for five consecutive years, districts must act to “restructure” the school. Within that broad mandate, though, NCLB offers districts flexibility on how to restructure schools:

- Reopen the school as a charter school;
- Contract with an external provider to manage a school;
- Replace staff and leadership;
- Turn the school’s operation over to the state; or
- Engage in some other kind of restructuring.

While federal law has provided minimal guidance on exactly what it means to “restructure” a school, the term itself implies a dramatic change in business as usual. One way to effect this change is starting fresh: allowing a new school to open within the walls of the old. But whether restructuring really amounts to starting fresh depends upon how the district and school go about the change process.

The first and second option, chartering and contracting, provide the clearest avenues for allowing schools to start fresh. Chartering or contracting, however, that leads only to incremental changes or change in only one aspect of a school’s operations (e.g., a new curriculum only or a new leader only, or worse yet – just “charter” inserted into the name of the school) or that ties a new school to district-wide policies would not be considered starting fresh as defined here. Instead, district leaders empower, by way of a charter or contract, the school to truly “start fresh” with a clean slate on which to re-create all aspects of the school’s design and structure.



## Who are Start Fresh “Providers”?

Many different kinds of teams can serve as school operators, or “providers” as we call them here, under the start fresh strategy. Some operate as nonprofit entities, while others are for-profit companies. Examples include:

- Self-formed teams of teachers in a local community
- Teams of parents, teachers and district administrators
- School management organizations, either new or experienced, local or national, that start and manage multiple schools
- Organizations providing education-related services (e.g., community-based organizations working in education or child development)
- Operators of stand-alone charter schools ready to replicate

The growing interest in the start fresh strategy has brought about heightened sense of the challenges to starting fresh successfully. In response, the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) has developed a series of publications to help district leaders implement a successful start fresh strategy.

This installment in the *Starting Fresh in Low-Performing Schools* series addresses an important challenge to the start fresh process in chronically low-performing schools: choosing the right providers to operate start fresh schools.



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## How Does Starting Fresh Differ From Conventional School Improvement Strategies?

“Change” is not a new term to public education. In fact, schools have been trying for years, even decades, to make changes that will improve student performance. However, to date these changes have been conventional, typically involving small to moderate changes, often one at a time. Curriculum and instructional changes, professional development and staffing changes are common elements of a conventional change strategy.

**Starting fresh** involves bold change in all aspects of school operations and leadership. Starting fresh occurs when a district enters into a contract or charter with a provider that has authority over all critical aspects of a school's policies and practices. Two aspects of change distinguish starting fresh most clearly from conventional change strategies:

- **Across-the-board change.** Not only is the leader different; all or most of the staff are as well. The school is truly in a position to create a new culture and a new set of approaches to teaching and learning, and to ensure that every aspect of the school is coordinated and complements the overall focus and culture.
- **Authority to do things differently.** When a district starts fresh, it gives the provider a great deal more control over school operations – such as staffing, management policies, instruction, schedules, discipline and parent relations. This control allows the start fresh school to target every policy and practice to the learning needs of that individual school's students, even when their needs differ profoundly from other students in local district schools.

Extensive research from a variety of organizational fields suggests that this kind of fresh start is often the best way to achieve the dramatic change underperforming schools need.



## Capacity Challenges: Governance, Leadership, and School Effectiveness

District leaders starting fresh have a very clear and specific goal: choose a provider highly likely to achieve academic success with the specific children in the school that is failing. Furthermore, district leaders have a precious asset – a building – to offer potential providers. Who will best use that asset to get learning results with these particular children? Knowing the characteristics of top-quality providers is essential. District leaders will need to consider three areas critical to choosing the right start fresh providers:

- **Governance capacity:** Will the school be governed by people who know how to oversee and monitor an organization?
- **School leadership capacity:** Will the school be led day-to-day by people with the particular competencies of successful start-up leaders?
- **School effectiveness know-how:** Is there an understanding of the essential elements of a quality, high-performing school and how to apply those to a particular school's student population?

### Governance Capacity

Will the start fresh school be supported by people who know how to oversee and monitor an organization? Day-to-day, a start fresh school (like any school) will be run by a school leader or leaders, and it's well known that the quality of that leadership is critical to success. But as important as school leaders are, you need to think about more than these individuals when choosing providers. Individual leaders come and go. Some outlive their usefulness as the needs of the schools they lead change. For these and other reasons, there must be something more to a “provider” than one charismatic leader. This “something more” is what we call “governance.”

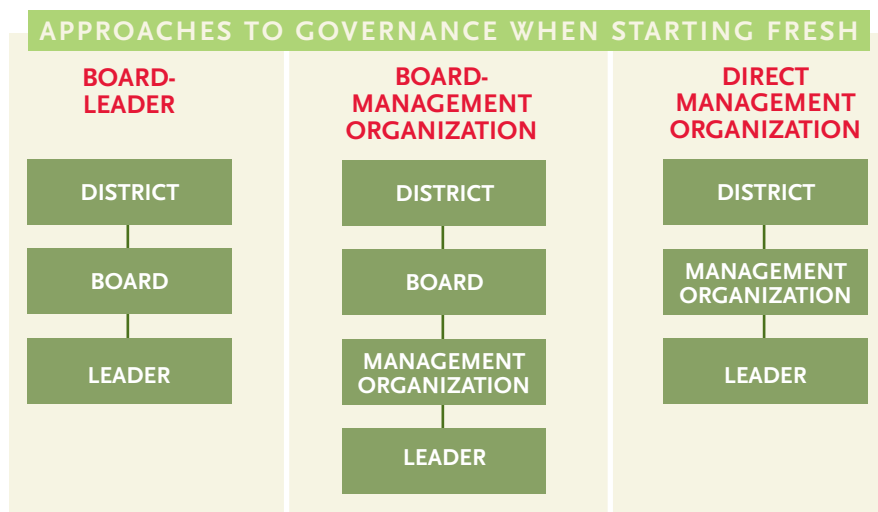


There are several variants of governance possible in a fresh start, portrayed in the figure below. These include:

**The board-leader model.** The school is governed by a board of directors. Governing the school may be the board's only function, or it may be the board of a larger organization with other functions. The district's contract or charter is with this board. The board, in turn, hires a leader or leaders to operate the school and the board holds that leader accountable for performance.

**The board-management organization model.** This model is the same as the board-leader model, except in this case the board hires a "management organization," which, in turn, hires a leader to manage the school. The management organization could be a nonprofit or for-profit entity that is in the business of operating one or more schools.

**The direct management organization model.** In this model, the district charters or contracts directly with a management organization, which in turn hires a leader to manage the school. There is no "board" of the school, though the management organization may have a board.



What's common across the three models is that the district charters or contracts with an organization or board of some kind. That organization's capacity to monitor and oversee the school is a critical criterion for the district in selecting a provider. Among the vital elements is capacity of the governance team to:

- Set the school's mission and broad strategic direction;
- Make policies that set parameters for the school leader's (or management organization's) freedom to act;
- Establish or approve short-term and long-term school goals and objectives;
- Hire a school leader (or management organization) who has the capacities described in the next section;
- Evaluate that leader's (or management organization's) performance against a clear set of standards for leadership, management and results;
- In the event the leader (or management organization) is not living up to expectations, act to bring in new leadership with the requisite capacity; and
- Carry out the fiduciary functions required by law.

As the bullets above suggest, many of the key aspects of the governance role have to do with selecting and managing the school's day-to-day leadership. In fact, it is difficult to imagine a governing board or management organization that could be successful without getting that part of its role right. Consequently, we turn now to the school leadership qualities that are necessary for successful fresh starts.



## School Leadership Capacity

Cross-industry research shows that leaders of successful start-up organizations are very similar to one another and that they differ from successful leaders embedded in larger, established organizations.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the similarities among successful start-up leaders are the key differentiators between highly successful and average “entrepreneurs.”

Leaders of successful start fresh schools must be capable of improving student performance – and doing it quickly. To achieve success with students coming from chronically low-performing schools, school leaders must be able to exert great influence over the attitudes and daily behaviors both of students and the adults who affect them (parents and teachers). Applying the research about common characteristics of highly successful start-up leaders, start fresh school leaders must be very good at:

**Driving for results.** These leaders do whatever it takes to get the job done. They set high goals, take initiative, and are persistent. They take action themselves, and they motivate teachers, parents and students to do their part. There is no “That’s not my job” attitude in successful start-ups, and the same is true of start fresh schools. These leaders set clear goals for student performance, persevere to meet those goals, eliminate activities that do not improve learning and increase activities that get learning results. They do this even when decisions are unpopular or different from approaches by schools with previously more successful student populations.

**Solving problems.** Thinking to solve problems – and then taking action – is a critical characteristic. These leaders make a plan that everyone can follow, and they are “hands on” to ensure that the plan is followed. And when an approach is not working, they know it and make immediate changes. They are data hounds – checking and rechecking progress and constantly rethinking approaching to get better results.



**Showing confidence.** These leaders exude confidence that goals will be achieved. Instead of treating problems as excuses for failure, they show that problems can be solved and results achieved. They do not excuse anyone from meeting the goal; nor do they excuse some students from learning (e.g., because of a student’s family or background).

**Influencing others.** Successful start-up leaders use relationships to get results. But they spend less time and energy engaging in long-term influence strategies and developing staff skills incrementally than do successful large-organization managers. Instead, start-up leaders use influence to assert themselves and persist in getting what they need to succeed. Though interpersonally skilled, they will risk sacrificing a relationship – by taking action or saying what needs to be said – to achieve learning results.

These leaders act differently from successful leaders in ongoing, low-change situations.<sup>2</sup> While some start-up leader characteristics are shared with all good leaders, a successful leader in an already high-performing organization spends far more time delegating core responsibilities, developing and improving staff performance incrementally, and managing long-term relationships within the larger organization. Those long term relationships are critical to garnering the resources and personal influence needed to make long-term, incremental improvements in large organiza-



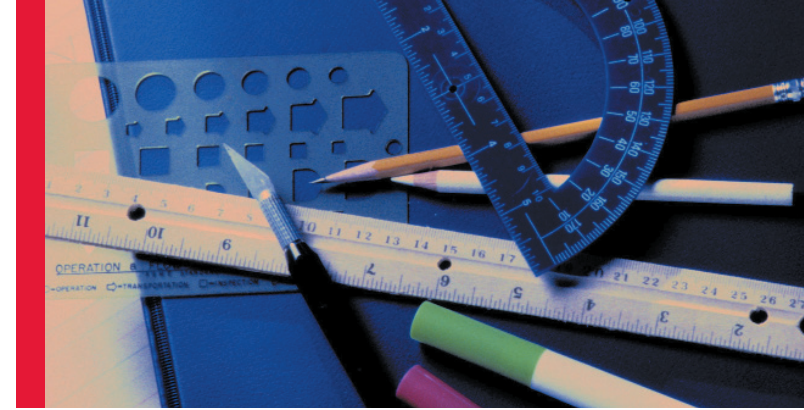
tions. In contrast, a successful start-up leader lives or dies by immediate results, not long-term improvement; when results are slow to happen, these leaders feel driven to figure out why and make immediate, dramatic changes until the right success formula is found. Because the actions that produce success for leaders of start-ups are different from those that create or sustain success for leaders of already-successful organizations, even effective leaders of established schools may not have the right profile to be successful in a start fresh school.

### Should Leaders Have Education Training?

Research indicates that it is the drive for results – goal-setting, problem-solving and perseverance – that most distinguishes successful start-up leaders.<sup>3</sup> Successful educators, even those who are brilliant in the classroom or who shine as district administrators, may not have the right profile for leading a successful start-up school, while non-educators who have succeeded in similar endeavors in other walks of life might.

**Leaders of successful** start fresh schools must be capable of improving student performance – and doing it quickly.

Research suggests that, across industries, new leaders are most likely to focus their early efforts on *disciplines with which they are familiar*.<sup>4</sup> Thus, start-up leaders with education backgrounds may be more likely to focus efforts on instruction-related activities rather than, for instance, marketing the school to parents or poring over school finances. This factor provides one “edge” to a prospective leader with an instructional background, but not one that trumps the more important question: does the person have the qualities of a successful start-up leader? It also suggests the possible



importance for non-educators who take the helm of schools to have easily-accessed instructional resources, such as a high-level “chief academic officer” to assist them or intensive, hands-on instructional training just prior to assuming leadership.

You may have to decide whether to grant a charter or contract to a founding board or a management organization that has not yet identified a specific person to lead the start fresh school. In these cases, you should look for indicators that the potential school provider can and will hire and manage a successful start-up leader.

There are several ways a provider could demonstrate this:

- Have a track record of managing several successful start-up schools with different leaders, such as charter schools, private schools or new public schools under a contract
- Have a track record of recruiting and managing effective start-up leaders in a non-school context, such as day care centers, social service organizations, or small nonprofits
- Have a proven process for recruiting start-up leaders, providing them with training, and helping them open schools
- Have a pool of potential leaders already identified who have start-up leader profiles
- Be able to articulate start-up leader selection criteria aligned with research about successful start-up leaders





### School Effectiveness Capacity

Because of the urgency to serve students who are failing in existing schools, district leaders will want to be as certain as possible that start fresh providers' school designs will work – and work quickly. Thus, districts will need a clear set of criteria to assess the proposed school designs. There are different ways to articulate these criteria. But they ought to align with research about what the best schools do.

**Because of the urgency** to serve students who are failing in existing schools, district leaders will want to be as certain as possible that start fresh providers' school designs will work – and work quickly.

Multiple teams of researchers over several decades have studied what the best schools do. The school characteristics found by the multiple research teams were highly similar, and collectively this is called the “effective schools” research. This body of knowledge does not dictate a specific school design. Rather, it points to a set of organizational characteristics that schools can incorporate in many different ways.

Below are common distinguishing characteristics of high performing schools from the effective schools literature:<sup>3</sup>

- Using a clear mission to drive decisions in daily school life.
- Keeping high expectations that all students will learn.
- Monitoring students' progress often during the school year.
- Making frequent changes in approaches for children who are not learning.
- Maintaining knowledge of current instructional research about what works and applying it to the school's students.
- Spending significant quantities of uninterrupted instructional time on core subjects.
- Maintaining a safe and orderly environment so that students may focus on learning.
- Establishing a strong connection between home and school so that parents can and will support their children's learning.
- Using leadership approaches that maximize the effectiveness of instruction.

A school provider should be able to articulate an understanding of these principles as well as a clear *plan of action* for applying them to the particular student and family population served.

Most charter school authorizers have developed criteria to judge the quality of a proposed school's educational design. These criteria take different forms and give different names to the qualities sought, but they largely converge around the items in the list above. NACSA's Online Authorizer Resource Library links to dozens of authorizer evaluation rubrics, criteria lists, and other relevant resources. Visit [www.charterauthorizers.org](http://www.charterauthorizers.org) for more information.





## Managing an Effective Selection Process

Understanding the importance of providers' governance, leadership and instructional effectiveness capacity is a critical aspect of starting fresh. In addition, starting fresh requires creating a *process* by which applicants will be selected to lead schools. What will the district do to improve the odds of attracting and choosing a school provider that will achieve fast, strong success?

Fortunately, the selection process is an increasingly well-traveled road thanks to a decade of experience nationally with charter school authorizing. Over this time, districts and other authorizers have developed the elements needed to make such a process successful, including:

- Requests for proposals that ask applicants to spell out their plans and qualifications;
- Protocols and guidelines for interviews, site visits, and other methods of gathering information about prospective providers;
- Rubrics for “grading” applicants against criteria;
- Approaches to using outside experts to vet applications and provide feedback; and
- Decision-making processes to ensure choices are made based on the merits.

NACSA's *Principles and Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing* already delineates standards for a high-quality charter application process and as a result, this publication will not treat this topic in any more depth. All districts considering a start fresh approach should explore this body of resources critical to recruiting a good pool of applicants and choosing wisely among them.



In 2004, Chicago Mayor Richard Daley announced Renaissance 2010, a bold plan to improve the educational quality and options for Chicago's students, families and educators. Renaissance 2010 calls for the creation of 200 new schools, in many cases closing low-performing schools and re-opening them as “fresh starts.”

To achieve this goal, Chicago Public Schools has issued a Request for Proposals seeking applications from organizations and individuals with viable plans for a high-performing school, and the capacity to act on the plan. The RFP details who may apply, what applicants must submit in order to be considered, the process for submitting an application, and the criteria CPS uses to make their selections.

Ideally, multiple applicants would meet the selection criteria. This would enable the district to focus on how well each provider's offerings fit with the targeted schools' student populations. A key goal, therefore, should be to recruit a pool of multiple provider applicants meeting the selection criteria. Possible sources of supply include:

- Existing high-quality single site schools seeking to replicate
- Entrepreneurial teachers and school leaders with the vision and capability to open new schools
- The emerging ranks of “charter management organizations,” “education management organizations” and other networks seeking to operate numerous public schools; these may be operated as for-profit or nonprofit organizations
- Community-based and cultural organizations with a track record of providing top-notch services and a desire to extend their work to K-12 education.



Make no mistake about it; the selection process is challenging to manage. You might feel enormous pressure to include selection criteria that may dilute the focus on increasing the performance of underserved students. In some instances, you will feel pressure to give preference to local providers, local school leaders or local staff, even when non-local applicants better meet the proven learning success criteria. In other instances, you will feel pressure to use a well-publicized large national provider, even when a local group has the better plan and team to meet student needs. It takes political nerves of steel to keep student learning as the dominant compass point of the starting fresh process; nonetheless, this focus is critical to making the right decision for students.

Or you may be in a position of choosing among providers with similar success records but varying experience replicating that success in multiple schools. Some providers have shown that they can replicate success in multiple schools, while others have not. Some new, highly successful charter schools have not had a chance to replicate yet, but may very well be able to do so successfully. In such cases, rating the capability of the replication effort is paramount in importance.

**It takes political** nerves of steel to keep student learning as the dominant compass point of the starting fresh process; nonetheless, this focus is critical to making the right decision for students.



## Conclusion

There is no magic answer for all of the decision-making challenges to selecting the right provider to operate a start fresh school. Knowing that they are likely to arise, however, can help you prepare to clear each hurdle and select providers capable of delivering a quality education to and achieving results with students that have been left behind for far too long.

### About the Starting Fresh in Low-Performing Schools Series

Research across a wide range of organizations tells us that starting fresh has a great deal of *potential* as a strategy for achieving substantial improvement in schools that need it the most. To realize that potential, though, district leaders need to craft a well-designed approach to starting fresh that takes advantage of what we know about successful fresh starts in schools and in other kinds of organizations.

NACSA's *Starting Fresh in Low-Performing Schools* series provides practical guidance to district leaders for implementing a successful school restructuring. The first publication in the series, *Starting Fresh in Low-Performing Schools: A New Option for District Leaders Under NCLB*, introduces what it means to start fresh and provides an overview of benefits, challenges and key steps in a start fresh strategy for districts.

This resource discusses the importance of selecting the right provider to operate the start fresh school. Other important aspects of a start fresh strategy include:

**Engage parents and community members** effectively in the starting fresh process. Parents and members of the community will take a strong interest in any effort to “do something” about schools they



regard as “their own.” Starting fresh can empower parents and communities in unprecedented ways – or it can spark conflict that derails reform. Engaging parents and community members productively is thus a critical part of the start fresh process.

**Establish the right relationship terms** between the district and the providers. As noted above, the very idea of starting fresh depends on the provider having wide authority to operate the school in ways that will work for students – even if those approaches deviate from established district policies. Granting providers that latitude – and then holding them accountable for results – is another essential element of an effective start fresh approach.

**Empower teachers** to overcome resistance to the strategy. Starting fresh is controversial and much of the controversy has little to do with the children that are not learning and more to do with the adults that stand to lose jobs. Bringing teachers to the table to work in support of the start fresh goals can go a long way in implementing a successful start fresh strategy.

Each of these topics will be examined in detail in similar publications. Email [startfresh@charterauthorizers.org](mailto:startfresh@charterauthorizers.org) to request copies of *Starting Fresh in Low-Performing Schools* publications.

#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> L. Spencer and S. Spencer, *Competence at Work: Models for Superior Performance*, (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 1993), pp. 199-236.
- <sup>2</sup> Spencer and Spencer, *Competence at Work*, pp. 199-236. See also J. Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...And Others Don't* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001) for exploration of successful large-organization leaders.
- <sup>3</sup> Spencer and Spencer, *Competence at Work*, pp. 199-236.
- <sup>4</sup> J. Gabarro, When a new manager takes charge, *Harvard Business Review*, (May-June 1985), pp. 110-123.
- <sup>5</sup> See “Effective schools” research summaries section of Annotated Bibliography.

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Also see The Association for Effective Schools, Inc. resources and research about effective schools at <http://www.mes.org/>



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